

A city of refuge

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

In the second half of the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth, Basel received waves of religious refugees. They came from Italy, where the Roman Inquisition, reorganised in 1542, persecuted Protestants and dissenters; from France, where the Wars of Religion began in 1562 and the Massacre of St Bartholomew in 1572 killed thousands of Huguenots; from the Spanish Netherlands, where the Duke of Alba's repression after 1567 and the fall of Antwerp in 1585 drove Protestants into exile; and from the territories of the Empire affected by the Counter-Reformation and, later, by the Thirty Years' War. While some of them passed through Basel on their way to other destinations, others stayed, acquired citizenship and founded families that would shape the economic history of the city for centuries.¹

The refugees brought with them capital, skills, commercial networks and new industries. Among them were merchants who had traded in Antwerp, Lyon, Lucca and Milan, printers and booksellers, silk weavers and dyers, physicians and scholars. They introduced the silk industry to Basel, strengthened the city's links with the commercial centres of Europe and supplied a new generation of entrepreneurs. The families of refugee origin, the Bernoulli, Sarasin, Battier, Passavant, de Bary, Werthemann and others, became part of the Basel elite and played a leading role in trade, industry and banking.

This chapter examines the refugees, the policy of the city towards them and the industries they founded, above all the silk ribbon industry, which became the leading industry of Basel from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century and prepared, through its dyeing needs, the chemical industry that Part D examines. It concludes Part B by drawing the lines that connect the sixteenth century with the financial centre of the following centuries.

A city of refuge

1 Notes

1. On the religious refugees in Basel in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Italians, French, Netherlands), see HLS, article "Glaubensflüchtlinge"; Burckhardt, *Geschichte der Stadt Basel*, 1942. To be verified. ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/basel-a-city-of-refuge